

WASHINGTON POST
17 JANUARY 1983

A-8

Reagan Vetoes Congress' Major Crime Bill

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President Reagan yesterday vetoed the major crime bill passed by the last Congress, charging that a provision to create a Cabinet-level "drug czar" to oversee the government's drug enforcement efforts would add unnecessary bureaucracy and confusion.

"The war on crime and drugs does not need more bureaucracy in Washington," Reagan said. "It does need more action in the field, and that is where my administration will focus its efforts."

With his veto Reagan, who said he strongly supported parts of the bill, angered both conservatives and liberals in Congress. They charged that the coalition they had formed to pass the bill was now splintered, with little hope of passing a crime bill in the remaining two years of Reagan's administration.

"By vetoing this legislation, crime reduction efforts have been thwarted," said Rep. Harold S. Sawyer (R-Mich.), a member of the House Judiciary Committee. "It is hard to justify this action, especially in light of the violent situation in Florida and the recent drug tampering. The Congress can hardly fulfill its responsibility of protecting the safety of our citizens when our efforts are continually frustrated."

Sen. Joseph R. Biden (D-Del.), a sponsor of the bill, concurred.

"This administration has always been strong on rhetoric about crime but weak on substantive action," he

said. "Dealing with this administration on crime-related issues has been a continual uphill battle for those of us in Congress—Republicans and Democrats alike—involved with these issues."

Several congressmen, led by Sen. Strom Thurmond (R-S.C.), Sen. Arlen Specter (R-Pa.) and Biden, visited Reagan last week and offered a compromise. Under the proposal, Reagan would have signed the bill with the understanding that the attorney general would be the "drug czar" until Congress amended the legislation to lessen the powers of the proposed official.

The fact that several agencies enforce drug laws—including the Treasury, State and Justice departments and the Pentagon—has prompted calls for one official to coordinate the efforts.

"The creation of [such an official] would produce friction, disrupt effective law enforcement, and could threaten the integrity of criminal investigations and prosecutions—the very opposite of what its proponents apparently intend," Reagan said in a memorandum of disapproval yesterday, the last day to sign the bill.

Specter, a former Philadelphia prosecutor, said the veto would threaten the chances of future crime legislation in Congress.

"We're all the administration's allies," said Specter. "We were telling them head-on that the important issue of the war on crime . . . is riding on our ability to deliver crime legislation. This was the just the opening wedge."

The bill would also have strengthened

federal laws that allow the government to seize the assets of drug traffickers and organized-crime figures; made tampering with food, drugs or cosmetics a federal crime; included a \$170 million grant program for local crime fighting and made it a federal crime to kill, kidnap or assault U.S. intelligence officers. Sen. Robert J. Dole (R-Kan.) said yesterday he would introduce another bill to provide money for

Reagan approved those provisions. But he strongly opposed creating a coordinating official. And he opposed making robbery or burglary with a firearm a federal offense if the defendant already has two convictions for such crimes and to give the local prosecutor veto power over a federal indictment.

"This provision includes an unworkable and possibly unconstitutional restraint upon federal prosecutions," Reagan said.

He said the administration had proposed significant legislation dealing with sentencing, bail laws and the insanity defense that Congress did not pass. "Such reforms, if enacted, could make a real difference in the quality of justice in this country," he said.

While vetoing the crime bill, Reagan signed bills authorizing the transfer of the Alaska Railroad to the state of Alaska and approving a new Migrant and Seasonal Agricultural Worker Protection Act.